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ABSTRACT

Like adult education, the field of volunteer management shows increasing movement toward professionalization. The establishment of standards--both for the profession of volunteer management and for volunteer service itself--is generating debates similar to adult educators' debates over purposes and objectives. The types of learning that occur in volunteer settings cross the spectrum of adult learning and include the following: instrumental learning, problem solving, experiential learning, empowerment, formal education and training, informal and incidental learning, and self-directed learning projects. Because much of volunteers' learning occurs beyond managerial control, volunteer managers may need to focus on how their organizational culture supports learning. Volunteering holds great potential for adult learning, even if the connections are not always explicit. Adult educators can help improve the quality of learning through the volunteer experience in the following ways: advocate a broader view of learning that goes beyond courses and workshops to include mentoring, peer support, and information needs; share with volunteer managers current knowledge about self-directed learning, program development, and assessment of adult learners; and provide greater recognition and support for informal learning by increasing individuals' capacity for critical reflection, enabling them to recognize and document their volunteer activities as learning experiences. (Contains 15 references) (MN)

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ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education

by Sandra Kerka

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Volunteering and Adult Learning

"The history of adult education has been a history of voluntary activity and voluntary association" (Ilsley 1989, p. 100)

Today, volunteerism, and the growing field of volunteer management, continue to reflect close associations with adult education. Research and practice in adult education can inform the development of learning opportunities for volunteers. With this in mind, this **Digest** describes some of the similarities between the fields of volunteer management and adult education and examines some of the types and methods of learning that occur in the context of volunteering.

Volunteer Management and Adult Education

Like adult education, the field of volunteer management shows increasing movement toward professionalization, as practitioners attempt to define a knowledge base, establish philosophical and ethical foundations and standards for entry and practice, form a distinctive subculture, and achieve recognition (Fisher and Cole 1993). The demographic profile of both adult learners and the volunteer pool is changing. No longer do full-time homemakers constitute the majority of volunteers; opportunities for service draw senior citizens, students in service learning projects, full-time professionals, and people with disabilities (Gerber 1991). These changing demographics propel changes in the practice of both fields. Volunteer managers are changing the type of tasks assigned to volunteers, the hours and places in which tasks are done (including offsite and online), and the kinds of training and recognition they offer to accommodate the needs of the new breed of volunteers (ibid.). Both fields are concerned with issues of recruitment and participation. People with more education are more likely to participate in adult education as well as in volunteer service (Morris and Caro 1995; Ramsey 1996).

The establishment of standards—both for the profession of volunteer management and for volunteer service itself—is generating debates similar to those among adult educators over purposes and objectives. Ilsley (1989) suggests that professionalization is making the volunteer field more technical and market oriented, similar to the way business language and methods are being borrowed in adult education. The agenda of volunteer organizations, especially those focused on social change, is in danger of being coopted as government and corporations formalize what may have been more grassroots, nonformal efforts (ibid.). Elsey (1993) identifies a similar debate in both the volunteer field and adult education over focus on individuals or society. He envisions the two fields forming a "third way" between government and the free market in the formation of civil society. For Elsdon (1995), voluntary activity is about *both* individuation and good citizenship, for it is through individual empowerment, achieved by participating and learning from that experience, that service is rendered.

Learning through Volunteering

"Learning is part of the contract between the organization and the volunteer" (McCabe 1997, p. 18). "Volunteering is a powerful source of learning" (Ross-Gordon and Dowling 1995, p. 307). Altruism may be the most obvious reason behind volunteering, but there are many other motivational factors that have an explicit or implicit link to learning. For some, learning new skills for career advancement or exploring job options is an important motivator (Gerber 1991; Ramsey 1996). For others, skills and experiences gained through volunteer service fulfill a need for relationships, personal growth and development, achievement, or affiliation. Acquiring a sense of purpose and making meaning of experience is a goal of other volunteers (Freedman 1994). Comprehensive orientation and volunteer training programs show that the "organization values them enough to make an investment in them" ("Seven Steps" 1997). Learning motivations vary by age. Ramsey (1996) found that younger volunteers especially valued the knowledge and career-related experience they acquired. Freedman (1994) discovered that older volunteers were less motivated by altruism than desire for purpose, affiliation, growth, and meaning.

The types of learning that occur in volunteer settings cross the spectrum of adult learning. Different contexts result in different types of learning, depending on the objectives of the organization and volunteer and the content and methods involved (Ilsley 1989). For example, institutions such as Literacy Volunteers of America may focus on instrumental learning to meet organizational goals, providing training in skills needed for specific tasks such as literacy tutoring. In ad hoc groups such as hospital guilds, social-expressive learning fulfills volunteers' social needs and imparts organizational values through group socialization and collaborative activities. Problem-focused organizations such as a volunteer fire department might emphasize problem solving, experiential learning, teamwork, and group process to accomplish their mission. In organizations dedicated to social causes, such as environmental groups, critical reflective learning might focus on political processes and empowerment to achieve desired social change (ibid.).

Formal education and training are essential, because volunteers need initial and ongoing orientation to learn about the organization and training to perform particular tasks or assume additional responsibilities. Workshops, seminars, mentorship, apprenticeship, training manuals, and other methods familiar to the education enterprise are integral to the mission of volunteer agencies. However, research shows that formal education is not "the primary source of the most significant learning" (Ross-Gordon and Dowling 1995, p. 313). Learning is a crucial factor in volunteers' satisfaction with their experience, and satisfied participants are more likely to remain committed to the organization. However, "much of that learning is beyond managerial control" (Fiset et al. 1987, p. 75). Volunteers frequently report learning by experience, interaction, or observation (ibid.). Informal and incidental learning that occurs in the process of activity is a significant part of the volunteer experience.

Self-directed learning (SDL) projects can involve both formal and informal methods. However, although a majority of volunteers Pornelli (1997) surveyed had conducted SDL projects, they did not consider their volunteer experiences to be SDL, perhaps because such projects were largely unplanned and learning needs were not explicitly expressed. Similarly, Elsdon (1995) found that many volunteer activities have no ostensible learning objectives but do result in such outcomes as personal growth, confidence, and interpersonal skills. Although many instances of deliberate learning and change among volunteers were evident, the "single most important finding from our work is that this *unpremeditated* group of changes—confidence, empowerment, making constructive relationships, organizational learning, ability and willingness to shoulder responsibility—is mentioned as the first and most important one by an overwhelming majority" (ibid., p. 79).

Volunteer Organizations as Learning Organizations

These findings suggest that "an organizational climate that recognizes the motivation of volunteers both to serve and to learn" (Fisher and Cole 1993, p. 113) is an essential element in the success of a volunteer enterprise. If, as Fisher et al. (1987) assert, much of the learning that will occur is beyond managerial control, volunteer managers may need to focus on how their organizational culture supports learning.

Elderhostel is an example of an organization that explicitly links learning and volunteering. A basic assumption of its Service Program is that informal learning will occur as participants acquire new skills, work in teams, and solve problems. This experiential learning is augmented by some formal education. Beyond formal and informal learning, "participants are given structured time for integrating what they have learned," which "helps them to incorporate the service experience into their broader life experience in a more meaningful way" (Lamdin and Fugate 1997, p. 106). Norsman (1997) also found that a climate in which participants can reflect, think critically, and act on behalf of their organization resulted in transformative learning.

Elsey (1993) confirms the need for reshaping the climate and culture of volunteer organizations. Although volunteers in his study valued training opportunities and learning, there was some opinion that resources should not be spent "indulging" in training rather than service, "a reflection of old culture" (p. 6). However, others recognized the importance of personal empowerment through learning as a motivation for volunteering and acknowledged the value it added to organizational effectiveness.

Conclusion

The value of learning through volunteer service is now being emphasized in the involvement of elementary-secondary and college students in service learning projects. Volunteering also holds great potential for adult learning, even if the connections are not always explicit. Adult educators can help improve the quality of learning through the volunteer experience in a number of ways:

- Advocating a broader view of learning that goes beyond courses and workshops to include mentoring, peer support, and information needs (McCabe 1997).

- Sharing with volunteer managers current knowledge about self-directed learning, program development, and assessment of adult learners (Ross-Gordon and Dowling 1995).

- Providing greater recognition and support for informal learning by increasing individuals' capacity for critical reflection, enabling them to recognize and document their volunteer activities as learning experiences.

Elsdon (1995) believes that "voluntary organizations are about individual learning and change, about empowerment to fulfill one's potential, and about mutual caring" (p. 80). Volunteer service is an important site of lifelong learning opportunities that benefit both individuals and society.

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